

LANGUAGE & DIPLOMACY

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This talk was given in Bangkok on 12 September 2007 to the International Symposium on English Language Training for ASEAN+3 Diplomats, at the generous invitation of the Devawongse Varopakarn Institute of Foreign Affairs of Thailand. I am greatly honoured to have been a guest speaker at this very inspiring symposium, the primary aim of which was to compare teaching methods, share experiences and pool resources in ELT for ASEAN+3 diplomats.

Language is often considered to be a secondary concern, a mere vehicle for the much more important content being communicated. Yet as all language teachers are well aware, *what* we say is not entirely independent of *how* we say it, quite on the contrary, language shapes content in many ways, from articulating thought, to imposing lexical choices and syntactic constraints, determining politeness registers, creating ambiguities, establishing authority and exercising influence. The discussion which arose in response to this talk prompted several of the participants to attend the online course on Language and Diplomacy which I offer under the auspices of DiploFoundation, and this in turn led the Malaysians to offer their own version of the online material as part of their language training. In addition to these professional outcomes, lasting personal friendships arose from the symposium, which provides the very best testimony to a successful diplomatic exercise!

Aim

The aim of this talk is to show how a basic knowledge of linguistics can help diplomats better understand the kind of everyday issues concerning language which they are likely to come across in their work. In particular, I aim to address four frequently asked questions about language:

- (1) Why are translations unreliable?
- (2) Why isn't word meaning fixed?
- (3) What is being said between the lines?
- (4) What should be done about ambiguity?

These questions are the ones most often raised by diplomats, and indeed, by diplomats exasperated by what they perceive to be the shortcomings of language users, rather than what we know to be defining properties of language itself.

In addressing these questions, I shall introduce some elementary linguistic dichotomies, namely: sense versus reference; prototype versus Aristotelian categories; implication and inference, broad versus narrow ambiguity.

My six years of teaching diplomats have led me to conclude that the best way to train diplomats linguistically is first to sensitise them to the nature of language, and then to equip them with some simple but reliable tools which they can then apply to the novel linguistic challenges they encounter. Although linguistic mastery is a necessary attribute of a good diplomat, it must be supplemented by psychological acuity if communication is to be effective. It is as important to know when to use a particular tool and to what purpose

depending on a multitude of contextual factors as it is to master the technical requirements of any one linguistic tool *in abstracto*. This talk offers you an illustrated insight into my approach.

Introduction

The primary medium of diplomacy is language. Diplomatic activities such as consultation, negotiation, agreement, ratification, translation and all sorts of information dissemination and retrieval relevant to diplomacy all depend on language. Diplomats are (or should be) wordsmiths - masters of language. Since language is their craft, good craftsmanship in diplomacy involves linguistic mastery. But what is linguistics?

Linguistics, as you know, is the study of the structure and function of language.¹ It includes a study of:

- phonetics, phonology, morphology, the lexicon, syntax, semantics, pragmatics (referred to as the layers of linguistic analysis)
- language acquisition, variation, history, processing, breakdown etc...
- Universal grammar and Mentalese (the language of thought).

For the diplomat, linguistics offers an insight into topics as diverse as the following:

- **Semantics:** What do people mean by what they say? This involves an understanding of how words come to get - and change - their meaning, as well as an understanding of double meanings, such as are found in ambiguity and irony.
- **Ambiguity:** why does ambiguity exist? What types of ambiguity can we identify? How do they come about? What uses or abuses can we put them to? Is ambiguity or clarity more important in diplomacy?
- **Pragmatics:** How does context influence interpretation? To what extent are intention, inference and presupposition important to diplomatic exchange? What is the relationship between language and action? Should utterances be understood as a form of action?
- **Translation and interpretation:** How should we overcome the challenge of non-equivalence across languages? How can definitive agreements come to be 'open to interpretation', and what is the difference between a 'good' versus 'bad faith' interpretation?
- **Language and thought:** How do we structure new concepts and restructure old ones? Why are analogy, metaphor and other tropes so central to our understanding of issues, and so useful when it comes to influencing actions?
- **Persuasion:** What is spin and how does it work? How does spin differ from rhetoric, propaganda, PR or Public Diplomacy? What are the common denominators between verbal and visual spin? Linguistics can help not only to alert us to the spin of others, but also to disarm it.
- **Soft Power and the media:** How can the Internet and other media of mass communication be exploited in order to benefit the image of a nation and thereby increase its influence?
- **Culture:** What is the linguistic justification for identifying language with culture and identity? What ramifications does this have with regard to language policies? How should we promote intercultural communication? Is the difference between a language and a dialect really a political construct, as is suggested by the adage that 'a language is a dialect with an army and a navy?'
- **The language of the Internet:** In what ways does the world wide web influence language and stylistics? What are the consequences of the linguistic digital divide? What kind of language policies should be adopted in Internet Governance?

¹ A very engaging and accessible introduction to linguistics is Steven Pinker's book, *The Language Instinct* (Penguin).

There are many other areas of intersection between language and diplomacy, including the relationship between politics and poetry found in rhetoric, political poetry and Seamus Heaney's notion of imaginative redress. I shall concentrate on Semantics, Pragmatics and Ambiguity here today.

FAQ 1: Why are translations unreliable?

Translation typically depends on finding lexical and syntactic equivalents between languages. But what happens when there are no exact equivalents? Lets look at some examples of lexical non-equivalence and the linguistic concepts which can shed light on the problem.

The meaning of a word is best understood in terms of the **sense** versus **reference** distinction: Reference maps between a word and the world (or more exactly, our mental constructs of that world). For example, *trickle* > *stream* > *rivulet* > *river* > *torrent*, are all words for running water. The one you choose to use depends on the size of the running water you are referring to. Notice however that whereas in English, size is the determining variable, in French the difference between *rivière* and *fleuve* is whether or not the water runs into the sea (a *fleuve* is a river which flows into the sea). So the reference of the English word *river* and the French *rivière* is different. The words are close approximations but not exact equivalents.

Sometimes even close approximations are difficult to find. What is the closest equivalent for the term 'outreach' and 'Public Diplomacy' in any other language you know? And sometimes words in one language exist in that language alone. Take the Greek term 'anosagnosia', which means 'the condition of being unaware of one's condition'. The reference of anosagnosia is a recognisable medical condition, suffered primarily by aphasiacs, but no other language has lexicalised the concept. The Greek term is either borrowed, or paraphrased. A third option, in cases of lexical non-equivalence, is to create a new word in your language. Because totally new words are difficult to disseminate, neologisms tend to be compounds (look at all the neologisms in ICT for instance).

Whereas reference maps between a word and the world, sense maps between a word and other words in the language. In our trickle-to-torrent example, the meaning of each term is constrained by the existence of the others. The lexicon of a language influences the meaning of a word because every word is understood in relationship to other words in its semantic field. Since every language has a unique lexicon, the sense of a particular word is not going to be identical across languages. Examples include:

- English *yes* versus French *oui* and *si*
- French *aimer* versus English *like* and *love*
- English *peace* versus Arabic & Farsi *salam* (peace as negotiation) and *sulh* (peace as reconciliation)

What these examples show is that the particular meaning of a given word is largely determined by the choice of other words with similar meanings in that language. Notice that differences in sense relations can also occur within the same language either across time or across dialects. The term *nigger* has always had the same reference: it denotes a dark skinned person usually of African origin, and derives from the Latin colour term for 'black'. Racial prejudice caused the term 'nigger' to acquire negative connotations. In order to avoid these, a new term was coined, namely *black*. For a while, the term 'black' was a connotation-free term whereas the word 'nigger' was a term of abuse: same reference, different sense. Prejudice once again came into play, contaminating the term 'black' with similar connotations as the term 'nigger'. So the term 'coloured' was introduced, only to suffer

the same fate. Interestingly enough, this development occurred only in American English, not British English, where to refer to somebody as 'coloured' does not have racist connotations. The Americans have introduced yet another term 'people of Afro-Caribbean origin.'

Meanwhile, the term 'nigger' has itself been adopted by the very people it denotes, and is used as an in-group term to refer to themselves. The connotations have been reversed, and 'nigger' is used as a term of pride by the relevant community. Whether you use the term 'nigger', and what it means when you do, is an important linguistic indicator of your own identity and even of your ideology. Knowing when and when not to use is it a matter of psychological acuity.

There is nothing inherently racist in the word 'nigger' itself: people are racist, language is not. But racism is reflected in the way we use language, particularly in the connotations words carry, and connotations differ not only across languages, but across dialects, speech communities, generations and even across different utterances.

Finally, to link back with translation, when a term is *abstract* rather than *concrete*, sense relationships are the main determiners of meaning. Translations are most reliable where meaning is rich in reference and poor in connotation (eg scientific texts) rather than rich in connotations (eg poetry and diplomacy). Since the meaning of words is rarely identical across languages, it is important that we should be aware of differences in connotations, and that we should alert the opposite party to such differences where relevant.

FAQ 2: Why isn't word meaning fixed?

One of the most frequent complaints people make about language is that meaning is slippery - the definitions of words don't seem to be fixed. How can we communicate effectively if meaning is unreliable? And who has the right to determine meaning? Can a government for instance change the definition of key terms in order to suit its needs, such as what constitutes a 'material breach' of disarmament obligations, or who belongs to the category 'terrorist'? We saw in the previous discussion of translation that connotations play a large part in word meaning, and that connotations are subject to change. In this section, I would like to investigate why the primary meaning of a word, its reference, might itself be subject to change. How do we assign terms such as 'man' or 'refugee' or 'sovereignty' to the right referents? Turned on its head, this question asks: how do we determine the membership of semantic categories?

A useful distinction in understanding semantic categories is that between **Aristotelian** and **Prototype** categories:

Properties of Aristotelian Categories:

- every semantic category has a checklist of defining features;
- category boundaries are fixed;
- all members are of equal status.

Examples of Aristotelian categories:

- human = [+two legs] [+upright] [+talking].
- bachelor = [+adult] [+male] [-married].
- Spinster = [+adult] [-male] [-married].

Advantages:

- category membership is unambiguous and fixed
- structural connections can be made between categories: subsets, supersets etc. (*bachelor* and *spinster* are subsets of the category *human*)

- logical connections can be made between categories and their containing sentences: antonyms, synonyms etc. (*bachelor* and *spinster* are antonyms, therefore to say 'my sister is a bachelor' is contradictory).

Problems:

- According to this approach, amputees, babies and mutes are not human since they fail the feature test (they are [-two legs] [-upright] [-talking] respectively)
- Aristotelian categories cannot account for (1) the well-formedness and (2) the difference in connotations between 'my sister is a real bachelor' and 'my brother is a real spinster'. What image comes to mind when you hear each of these utterances?

In contrast to Aristotelian categories, the defining properties of Prototype categories are:

- category boundaries are fuzzy (a bat is a bird *in that* it has wings and it can fly);
- category members do not have equal status: (a robin is a bird *par excellence* versus ?!a penguin is a bird *par excellence*)[1];
- non-members have unequal status (a bat is a bird vs ?! time is a bird ... in that it can fly).

Prototypes are therefore 'best examples', and prototype theory argues that category membership clusters around prototypes: reddest red; yellowest yellow etc.

Examples of prototype categories include:

- *robin* is the best example of the category *bird*;
- a dispossessed and politically persecuted person who has fled their country is the prototype of a *refugee*;
- *sovereignty* typically extends to national borders.

Advantages:

- flexibility: new members can be included on the basis of partial resemblance.
- adaptability: redefinitions can be made according to need - categories are negotiable.
- prototype categories reflect language use and explain linguistic hedges such as *in that*, *in so far as*, *strictly speaking*, *technically*, *par excellence*, etc.. The prevalence of hedges suggests that we habitually use prototype categories, and that Aristotelian categories are the exception (eg *strictly or technically speaking*).

Problems:

- semantic slippage and ambiguity

Although many people would like meaning to be more fixed, Aristotelian categories are too categorical. They do not reflect the nature of language or of the human mind. We assign new members to categories by a process of analogy, not by means of a checklist of predetermined features. As a result, category membership is negotiable. Individual speakers - or on occasion governments - may try to redefine words to suit their own ends. For example, in the case of *sovereignty*, we might ask where exactly does the jurisdiction of a sovereign state begin and end? We will find that although the choice of answers depends on the number of interested parties, the ultimate answer is more likely to depend on the interested party with greatest authority than on a dictionary definition!

All living languages change over time and across communities. Changes in meaning are the result of changes in usage, introduced by a few members of a particular speech community and then adopted more widely. We saw an example of this in the discussion of the term *nigger* in the previous section. Although change is inevitable, there has to be a **consensus** over usage if we are to communicate successfully. It is this consensus which 'fixes' usage and provides the necessary stability in language for communication to succeed. If we all made up meanings as we went along, there would soon be a breakdown of communication. Consider the following passage from *Alice Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll:

Humpty Dumpty: 'There's glory for you!'
'I don't know what you mean by "glory",' Alice said.
Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. 'Of course you don't - till I tell you. I meant "here's a nice knock-down argument for you!"'
'But "glory" doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument"!' Alice objected.
'When I use a word', Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less!'
'The question is' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things'
'The question is' said Humpty Dumpty 'which is to be master - that's all'.

Alice and Humpty Dumpty's final questions provide a good point for debate: what is the relationship between meaning, negotiation and authority?

FAQ 3: What is being said between the lines?

The observation that people do not always mean what they say, or that there might be more to what they say than first meets the eye, is a cause of considerable concern. How can we trust interlocutors if we cannot take them at their word? What hidden resources of language caused the French, Russians and Chinese to expend so much time and expertise trying to unearth the 'secret triggers' for war buried in the wording of UN Security Council resolution 1441?

A useful distinction can be made between what is **stated**, what is **implied** and what is **inferred**. Much of what we communicate through language is implied (implicitly suggested), not stated (explicitly mentioned). This is most obviously the case when we use irony, ambiguity, allusion, euphemism, metaphor and other figures of speech or 'tropes'. But implied meaning pervades language beyond figures of speech. This is because language always **underspecifies** the meaning we obtain from it! The code-model of language in which a thought is encoded into language, transmitted by spoken or written or other means, then fully decoded by a receiver is not adequate! Language is not just a code. Much of the meaning we obtain from communication is inferred: that is to say that we need to make an educated guess about what our interlocutors have in mind from what they say to us. Note that we don't only rely on linguistic evidence however, we also appeal to our knowledge of the context and of the person in question, our reading of their body language and our understanding of the world more generally.

For example, the terms *headache pill* and *longevity pill* have inverse meanings, since one pill gets rid of a headache, whereas the other gets hold of long life. The meaning of each term has to be inferred from world knowledge since it is not signalled explicitly.

Similarly, the thought process behind the following exchange involves implication and inference:

Host: Will you have a cup of coffee?

Guest: I have a lot of work to do tomorrow!

Does the guest want or not want coffee after dinner? What kind of knowledge do we need to bring to bear on this exchange in order to interpret it correctly?

Inference takes place at all levels of linguistic analysis, from phonetic, morphological, lexical, and syntactic to pragmatic. Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of inference is that it is conducted automatically and therefore unconsciously. In everyday language, a speaker's meaning always has to be inferred from the available evidence, and although this process of

inference is largely aided by conventions of meaning and communication, meaning is always going to be open to interpretation, and therefore also to misinterpretation.

FAQ 4: What should be done about ambiguity?

Let us start with some definitions. The word 'ambiguity' is itself ambiguous, embracing as it does the two distinct meanings contained in 'ambidextrist' and in 'ambient'. The 'ambi' in words such as 'ambidextrist' entails the existence of two distinct variables (be they hands or values), and therefore invites either an inclusion of both or a binary choice between the two. In contrast, the meaning of 'ambi' in words like 'ambient' refers to multivalency or indeterminacy in which one value merges into an adjacent one. The fact that a word such as 'ambivalent' is ambiguous between a categorical (narrow) versus a multivalent (broad) sense epitomises the main definitional problem of ambiguity, that it has two meanings, and that these two meanings are not always distinct but can merge into each other!

In order to get round this problem, some scholars have adopted a narrow definition of ambiguity which refers exclusively to the binary or categorical sense: 'In order to qualify as an ambiguity an expression must generate not only "at least two different meanings", but also two incompatible and unrelated meanings.' (Pehar, 2001:164).

I refer to both senses here, since I believe that an understanding of ambiguity benefits from a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon. It would be Procrustean, for instance, only to study the categorical meaning of the term 'ambivalent' (as in 'she is ambivalent between these two options') and to ignore uses which involve multivalency or indeterminacy (as in 'she is too ambivalent a person to find decision making easy').

NARROW AMBIGUITY: The following areas of language may, in the right context, give rise to categorical ambiguity:

- Homophony (same sound, different etymology and meaning), eg. The minister has put a cheque/chick aside for you.
- Polysemy (one word, many (often but not always) distinct meanings), eg. 'Too much lying is bad for your health' where 'to lie' means either to tell a lie or to lie down. Another example is: 'The President is ambivalent', which as noted might refer to his views on a particular matter, or to his personality more generally. Only further contextual information, as in the insertion of clarificatory adverbs or the recourse to paraphrase, can help disambiguate the intended meaning.
- Syntax (the structure of sentences), eg. 'The president may not go to Iraq' where the President may either decide not to go, or he does not have the right to go, depending on whether the scope of the negative 'not' extends over the modal 'may' or over the verb 'go'. (For another example of negative scope ambiguity, see the Latin translation of the Oracle of Delphi's pronouncement: *Ibis, redibis numquam peribis in bello* in which the two readings are either 'You'll leave, and you shall never return as you will perish in the war', or 'You'll leave and return, and you shall not perish in the war.' Here again the interpretation depends on which verb the negative marker is thought to qualify). A distinctive feature of syntactic ambiguity, whether it involves negative scope as in these examples, or constituent structure, anaphora, quantification or any of a host of other possible variables, is that it is always categorical, yielding two exclusive and incompatible readings.

- Rhetoric (the figurative rather than literal use of a term), eg. 'He is an honourable man' out of context has a very different meaning from the ironical spin it acquires over several repetitions in Mark Anthony's funeral oration in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar.

BROAD AMBIGUITY: Conversely, the following examples may give rise to multivalent ambiguity or 'open-ended' interpretations:

- Semantic vagueness (polysemy without distinct meaning boundaries), eg. What constitutes the 'material breach' of a resolution? Is it the same in all instances or does it have to be specified case by case? And is it reasonable to have a checklist of specifications or would this be dangerously inflexible in the light of possible unforeseen breaches?
- Connotations (associated meanings which arise from context and don't make up the primary sense of a word or utterance), eg. The connotations of 'nigger' vary between a term of pride and a term of abuse depending on who uses it to whom with what intention.
- Parataxis (the juxtaposition of two clauses without a conjunction such as 'and', 'but', 'or', and without a complementiser such as 'therefore', 'since', 'because' to indicate the logical relationship between the two propositions), eg. 'The minister was late. The president left.' Are the two clauses causally or temporally connected? Notice how the use of parataxis by President Bush where he mentions Iraq and September 11th in the same breath, has prompted people to infer a connection between them. The following is an example:

'We knew Saddam Hussein's record of aggression and support for terror. We knew his long history of pursuing, even using, weapons of mass destruction. And we know that September 11th requires our country to think differently.'
(President George W Bush's address to the 2004 Republican Party convention, cited on the BBC website, 3 September 2004)
- Implications (understated intended meanings). Implications give rise to the open-ended meanings which we generally associate with ambiguity in everyday speech. We are always asking ourselves 'what did they mean by what they said?' and often coming to the conclusion that 'it all depends' on context and perspective.

These prototypical cases of categorical as opposed to multivalent ambiguity hide the fact that very often ambiguity cannot be neatly compartmentalised, and that a single utterance can contain many different types of ambiguity. This is the case in the following quote from the 16/17th century diplomat Henry Wotton:

'A diplomat is an 'honest man sent to lie abroad for the good of his country.'

In this example, multivalent ambiguity comes into play both in the form of vagueness (what kind of mendacity is in question?), and also in the form of implications (in what way might a diplomat be required to lie for his country, to whom, and to what end? what exactly is being implied by Wotton in this definition?). Categorical ambiguity comes into play, since the term *to lie* is, as noted above, polysemous: its three distinct meanings have to do (a) with mendacity and (b) with lying down (c) with residing (a now archaic usage).

Why is language ambiguous? Why does human language accommodate so much ambiguity? Is it a design flaw which prevents effective communication? Or is it the price one has to pay for other highly advantageous properties of language, such as flexibility? Or finally is it an underestimated resource which has been unfairly maligned?

By and large ambiguity has an unjustifiably bad name. It is not ambiguity itself which is remiss, but the use and abuse it is subjected to. Ambiguity is highly context dependent, both in its realisation and in its resolution. It is therefore difficult to find cases of totally intractable ambiguity which cannot be disambiguated given contextual information. It is also difficult to find cases of ambiguity which do not have a preferred reading. The diplomatic notion of 'good faith interpretation' assumes a default or consensual context of interpretation.

Moreover, disambiguation may not be the desirable objective in all cases of ambiguity. The very notion of 'constructive ambiguity', whether it applies to narrow ambiguity or whether it refers to metaphorical elaboration, is predicated on the belief that ambiguity can have beneficial spin offs. In diplomacy, these may range from buying room for manoeuvre, to securing more time for negotiation, to inviting a spirit of collaboration among rival parties.²

Meaning is largely context dependent. This basic truism about language has three consequences with regard to ambiguities. The first, according to linguistic research, is that we register many fewer ambiguities than are actually present in any given utterance or text. This is because we are primed to expect a particular meaning by the existing context of utterance. The reason why we find word play and punning so amusing is no doubt because they alert us to ambiguities we had not recognised, and in so doing, challenge the limitations of our mindsets.

The second consequence is that on those occasions when we *do* perceive an ambiguity, we immediately appeal to the context of utterance in order to disambiguate the probable meaning from the possible meaning(s).

A third consequence of the importance of context to interpretation is that we are constantly bound to monitor meaning in the light both of broader and/or alternative synchronic contexts as well as of changing diachronic contexts. As McHugo has shown with regard to UNSC Resolution 242,³ interpretations of the text are subject first to the constraints imposed by the immediate context in which it was produced (for which drafts and minutes of discussion provide empirical evidence). Second, interpretations of both the Resolution and of the supporting contextual data can be seen to have changed over time because of developments in the larger political context. The very notion of 'good faith interpretation', raised in Article 31 of the Vienna Convention, is premised on a notion of 'ordinary meaning' as determined by the immediate linguistic context and conforming with the intentions and objectives of the parties involved in the communication.

The three aspects of ambiguity outlined here (recognition, disambiguation and monitoring) should be understood in the light of current philosophical thinking about the nature of language more generally and its relationship to reality in particular. The defining role of context on interpretation and the central role of ambiguity can be seen as part of the 'linguistic turn' which is at the heart of post-structuralism. This refers to the recognition in the last decades of the 20th Century that language is not just a tool for describing an objective reality, but a key creator of the social worlds people experience. Never an easy concept to grasp, the

² For further discussion and examples, see Kurbalija and Slavik (eds.) 2001 *Language and Diplomacy*. Malta: Diplo Foundation, especially the chapters by Drazen Pehar, Norman Scott, and Raymond Cohen.

³ John McHugo 'Resolution 242: a legal reappraisal of the right-wing Israeli interpretation of the withdrawal phrase with reference to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians', published in the ICLQ, vol 51, October 2002, pp 851-882.

following definition from a renowned analyst of political language gives an insight into current views on the centrality of the linguistic turn:

'The "linguistic turn" in philosophy, social psychology, and literary theory has called attention to language games that construct alternative realities, grammars that transform the perceptible into non-obvious meanings, and language as a form of action that generates radiating chains of connotations while undermining its own assumptions and assertions.' (Murray Edelman, 1988, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*. University of Chicago Press, p103)

Edelman's argument is that ambiguity pervades political life precisely because of our capacity to construct ever novel contexts of interpretation:

'The ingenuity of the human mind in constructing worlds and the capacity of language to indulge that talent are subtle and concealed, but they are also the fundamental influences upon politics.' (1988:102)

According to Edelman 'there can be no world of events distinct from the interpretation of observers' and as a result, 'ambiguity and subjectivity are neither deviations nor pathologies ... they constitute the political world.' (1988:95).

Summary

With regard to why translations are unreliable, we looked at the distinction between sense and reference and concluded that connotations are an important part of word meaning. The 'primary' meaning of a word may be its reference, i.e. what it *denotes*, but ideologically loaded meaning is found in what a given word *connotes*, and this is part of its sense. The main reason why translations are never exact (not just between languages but between dialects too, or even within the same dialect at different times), is because connotations are never identical. Although there is no way round this, it is useful to be aware of the fact. Differences in interpretation are likely to arise over differences in connotations and implications. To the extent that we are aware of where and why differences in interpretation might arise, we are in a position to prevent disagreement. To be forewarned is to be forarmed, and the advantage of linguistics is its power to forewarn through heightened awareness.

With regard to why definitions change, we looked at the difference between Aristotelian and Prototype semantic categories. We all seem to expect words to have fixed meanings which we can look up in the dictionary and use rigorously in our speech. Yet in actual usage, we are constantly redefining words to suit our needs. Why else would we so often use the expressions 'depends what you mean by X'. A balance obviously has to be struck between flexibility and fixity or we would not be able to understand each other. Our conclusion was that meaning is negotiable. The negotiators are the speakers of a linguistic community. Language use determines word meaning, and dictionaries merely log that use, which is why they have to be constantly updated. Of course, dictionaries tend to exert a prescriptive influence on speakers as well, but the bottom line remains that meaning is negotiable. It seems essential that diplomats of all people should be aware of this fact.

With regard to implied meaning, we concluded that language always underspecifies the intended meaning of its speakers. Inference is the name of the game, and we resort to it without necessarily being aware of it. Obviously there are cases where a speaker consciously makes certain implications, or where hearers consciously set out to infer the full range of possible meanings, no matter how implausible. What is important to retain for the purpose of this talk, is that such cases are part of a continuum of implication and inference which are inherent to natural languages, but not to artificial languages. The difference between them is that artificial languages are indeed codes, whereas natural languages cannot be reduced to

codes. This accounts for both their flexibility, and their imprecision. Where attempts *are* made to eliminate inference, as in legal language, the result paradoxically is often difficult to understand.

With regard to ambiguity, we have identified two main classes: narrow ambiguity (categorical/binary) and broad ambiguity (semantic/multivalent). We have also established that ambiguity exists because it is a product of human cognition, which requires flexibility in order to respond to novel information. Although ambiguity pervades language, its deleterious effects can nevertheless be avoided first by heightening our awareness of its existence and manifestations, and second by agreeing on speaker intentions and contexts of interpretation. Finally, ambiguity may also prove advantageous at times, and is best capitalised upon both through linguistic mastery and a well tuned sense of judgment. It has been said that ‘ambiguity always favours the conceding party’ – is this the case? Does power always determine the last word? This is another provocative topic for debate which I will postpone with an ‘it depends’ cliff-hanger. It is worth noting, however, that psychological acuity is required in recognising and evaluating the variables which come into play in any ambiguous communication.

Conclusion

The conclusion we may draw on the nature of language from the insights offered here is that human language is very much a product of human cognition on the one hand, that is to say the cognitive processes which enable us to make sense of our senses, and of human communication on the other. Whereas cognition *entails* adaptability to new information, changing contexts and varied perspectives, communication invariably *involves* or *consists* of novel information contexts and perspectives. So it is not at all surprising to find that language has evolved into a flexible system which allows its users to communicate through implication, inference and negotiation, and not only through a rigid code. Ambiguity and imprecision result from this unique marriage of the demands of cognition and of communication.

The conclusions we may draw on language training for diplomats is that a brief introduction to the nature of language, and to some of the basic concepts of linguistics, offers an invaluable resource in tackling most language related issues. Experience in the field in turn hones ones ability to read situations and respond with acumen. The bottom line is that *awareness* of language and how it works is a prerequisite to becoming masters of discourse rather than being mastered by it.